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# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Ann Millett-Gallant.** *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 177 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-10406-8.

**Reviewed by** Maureen Park (University of Glasgow)

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## Enabling Art?

Representations of disabled bodies are not uncommon in Western art. Figures using crutches appear in the paintings of Masaccio and Pieter Bruegel the Elder; court dwarfs feature in a stunning series of portraits by Diego Velázquez; Jusepe de Ribera produced a memorable image of a boy with a clubfoot. But rarely are such images analyzed within the context of disability. In *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art*, Ann Millett-Gallant aims to explore what can be learned about art “from the perspective of disability” and disability “through contemporary art” (pp. 5-6). In doing so, she brings a fresh eye and a novel approach by combining the disciplines of art history and disability studies. Her focus is not so much on the past (although she makes some valuable references to historical precedents) but on contemporary art, works or performances that force the viewer to stare at and interact with the art. She produces a fascinating and challenging narrative, one that introduces us to art that revels in “corporeal difference, deviance, and abnormal disfigurement” (p. 10). This is an important scholarly book, grounded in both current disability studies research (in particular the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and David Hevey) and art historical perspectives.

In each of four main chapters, Millett-Gallant draws comparisons between works by contemporary disabled and nondisabled artists in order to highlight the importance of different perceptions of disability. To this she adds a valuable personal perspective—the author is physically disabled. She begins her introduction with an icon of modern art, Frida Kahlo, the Mexican artist whose self portraits reveal so much about herself and her disability. Kahlo’s imagery, displaying defiantly rather than hiding her physical disfigurement, has paved the way for more recent artists, such as Carmen Lomas Garza, Kathy Vargas, and Miriam Schapiro, to explore imagery of disfigurement and disease. Millett-Gallant considers why we gaze and stare at disabled bodies and examines how that

gaze is being returned by contemporary disabled artists and models who choose to “parade their abnormalities” in order to “shake notions of normality to the core” (p. 15).

In chapter 1, “Disarming Venus,” Millett-Gallant uses the image of the goddess and epitome of female beauty, *Venus de Milo*, as a focus for her discussion on creative performances and works of art that challenge conventional representations of “whole” and “broken” bodies in art. She describes the performances of Mary Duffy whose own armless body does not conform to the stereotypical idealized form, linking such performances to the feminist art movement. One of the strengths of Millett-Gallant’s discussion is the way that she draws on historical precedents of “imperfect” female bodies publicly displayed, including Saartjie Bartman (the Hottentot Venus) and photographs of Anne E. Leake-Thompson (the “Armless Wonder”). She picks up on Garland-Thomson’s theme of “gaze/stare” to show how such artists as Sandie Yi and Susan Harbage are creating “new languages and representations for disability in the public eye” (p. 49).

Chapter 2, “Sculpting Body Ideals,” examines the sculpture of Marc Quinn, in particular his celebrated piece *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, which graced the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square, London, for eighteen months from 2005. This oversized, marble sculpture depicts the artist Lapper, who was born without arms and with shortened legs, when she was seven months pregnant. Few works of contemporary public art have caused such controversy. Millett-Gallant contextualizes the role of public art and joins the debate, questioning whether Quinn’s sculpture is a tasteless form of exploitation or whether it exposes the public to issues of disability, exclusion, and diversity. She links Quinn’s sculpture to the classical and neoclassical statuary, apparently at odds with its conventions of the perfect female form and yet striking a similar balance between its ideals of individ-

ual likeness and public symbolism. Lapper has said that she regards the sculpture as “a modern tribute to femininity, disability, and motherhood,” and Millett-Gallant considers that, as such, it is as heroic as the statues of male military heroes that dominate Trafalgar Square (p. 55).

In chapter 3, “Performing Amputation,” the focus turns to representations of disability as a social spectacle, exemplified in the photographs of Joel-Peter Witkin. His bizarre, disturbing images of amputees or dismembered bodies assembled in theatrical settings (“corporeal tableau vivants”) have been criticized for appearing to “fetishize, capitalize on, and even contribute to human suffering” (p. 101). Millett-Gallant acknowledges such criticism but offers a different perspective, suggesting that Witkin’s art becomes a stage on which amputees can willingly “parade their corporeal spectacularity” (p. 86). She features in one such photograph. She argues that his work has links to historical representations of disability: early medical photography (“sanitized voyeurism”) in which disabled bodies were studied, visually recorded, and classified as “monstrous others” (p. 107); and echoes of souvenir photographs of “freak show” personalities from the early twentieth century. For Millett-Gallant, Witkin’s photographs challenge the spectator to question not so much how they disturb us but rather why. In fact, the images do both and some make for very unsettling viewing.

Chapter 4, “Exceeding the Frame,” turns to the photographic images by Diane Arbus of people who make “spectacular spectacles of themselves” and in doing so make themselves “freakish” (p. 113). In the last years

of her life, Arbus produced a visual record of characters who were socially marginalized due to their unusual bodies or their behavior—sideshow performers, transvestites, aged beauty queens, and badly behaved children. Millett-Gallant notes how through “intense exchanges of gazes and stares between the subjects, the viewers, and Arbus’s camera, desire and alienation crystallize” (p. 113). She challenges Hevey’s interpretation of these photographs as “enfreakment,” preferring instead to expand the debate by questioning if, and how, photography can offer a uniquely “disembodied gaze for the viewer” (p. 115). She argues against this, explaining how Arbus’s photographs are characterized by interactions between the viewer and sitter, looking and looking back at each other. Here Millett-Gallant takes an art historical approach, providing visual analysis of images of the giant Eddie Carmel, comparing his portrayal to that of the eighteenth-century Irish giant, Charles Byrne. When discussing Arbus’s photograph of the Mexican dwarf, Cha Cha, she makes reference to such precedents as Charles S. Stratton (General Tom Thumb) and the dwarfs at the Court of Philip IV of Spain in the seventeenth century. Millett-Gallant explains how such images invite and then return the gaze.

In her conclusion, Millett-Gallant states that gazing at bodies “articulates, mediates, and informs everyday social interactions, as well as larger social constructions” (p. 141). Her proposition that new perspectives on works of art can be created when they are viewed through the lens of disability is very well articulated in *The Disabled Body in Contemporary Art*. The book makes a worthy contribution to art history and disability studies research.

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